

# **Center for Youth Leadership**

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Why wait for someone else to make a difference?

## **Connecticut Legislature: Judiciary Committee *Testimony in Support of Raised HB 5504: An Act Concerning Commercial Sexual Exploitation of a Minor***

***March 19, 2012***

*Emily Todd and Carly Cordovano*

Hi Representative Fox, Representative Coleman and members of the committee. We have a special greeting for Representative Morris, who is from our district in Norwalk; Representative Flexer, with whom we have worked on dating violence legislation; and Senator Gerratana, with whom we have worked on child abuse legislation.

My name is Emily Todd and this is Carly Cordovano. On behalf of the 226 members of the Center for Youth Leadership at Brien McMahon High School, we are here in support of *Raised HB 5504 - An Act Concerning the Commercial Sexual Exploitation of a Minor*.

This is not a one-shot deal for us; our members have been working on human trafficking issues in the United States since 2007. We have participated in conferences and met with victims of trafficking. We lead discussions with elected officials, at civic organizations, and wherever people our age hang out. In partnership with Love 146 in New Haven, we host the only on-going classroom trafficking presentation at schools in Fairfield County. Every Friday night, regardless of the time of year, we stand on street corners and in storefront windows to raise awareness of the commercial sexual exploitation of children. We have written op-ed essays about trafficking at the Super Bowl and led an annual silent street demonstration before the game. In 2010 and 2011 we worked really hard in support of legislation that eventually became PA 115 and PA 180.

And we bring a hometown experience to this hearing. In January 2012, with the sentencing of Theodore PeeJaye Briggs, we had to re-live his pimping across state lines of two teenage girls from Norwalk. According to published reports, investigators from the Norwalk Police Department and the U.S. Department of Homeland Security found more than 6,000 text messages on Briggs' cellphone from customers responding to ads placed on Backpage.com, a classified advertising website that sells cars, books and girls our age and younger.

Connecticut is not alone when it comes to Backpage, which, according to the National Association of Attorneys General, is the premier web site for human trafficking in the United States, earning more than \$22 million annually from prostitution ads; a marketing tool that has led to arrests in 22 states, including Brooklyn, New York, "...where the great majority of sex trafficking cases involve girls marketed on Backpage" (*New York Times*, March 18, 2012).

While we are in agreement with the language in HB 5504, we urge you to couple the legislation with public pressure to stop online advertisers from carrying prostitution advertising. We realize this may raise cries of censorship, but should these advertisers get a pass when it comes to helping exploit children? And the pressure may work. According to the AIM Group, a media research company, in the year after Craigslist eliminated ads for prostitution from its sites in the United States, the amount spent on online prostitution advertising in the U.S. dropped by more than 50 percent.

Also, we ask that you review the 2011 report by the Center on Communication Leadership and Policy at the Annenberg School of Communication and Journalism at the University of Southern California. The report, "Human Trafficking Online," is a fascinating look at the role of social networking sites and online classifieds in the sexual exploitation of children.

Connecticut has been on somewhat of a roll when it comes to addressing human trafficking and people our age. Public Acts 115 and 180 were enacted in the last 24 months. Public and private agencies continue to identify and help victims of trafficking. And more and more awareness campaigns educate the general public.

HB 5504, when coupled with public pressure on online advertisers, will keep us heading in the right direction. If you need a reminder of the importance of the legislation, listen to the words of a 14-year-old girl from Norwalk who was pimped out by Theodore Briggs using online advertisements. "Theodore was a sweetheart" she wrote in her diary that was filled with flowers and hearts. "He was the one who turned me into a real ho" (*Stamford Advocate*, January 28, 2012).

Thanks for the opportunity to talk to you.

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